
Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

Spymasters: Ten CIA Officers in Their Own Words

Edited By Ralph E. Weber. Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1999.

Reviewed by Thomas M. Troy

This book supports the argument that one should never pay any attention to the “blurbs” from “reviews” that the publisher includes on the dust jacket, especially if the author (in this case, the editor, Professor Ralph E. Weber) acknowledges and thanks the “reviewers” for their assistance. *Spymasters* is disappointing. It is a collection of oral interviews of five former Directors of Central Intelligence (DCIs) and five other senior officials of the CIA. The five former DCIs are Sidney W. Souers, Allen W. Dulles, John A. McCone, Richard M. Helms, and William E. Colby. The other officials are former Deputy Director for Plans Richard M. Bissell; former Deputy Directors for Intelligence Robert Amory, Jr., and Ray S. Cline; former Executive Director Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr.; and former Executive Assistant to the Deputy Director for Plans Samuel Halpern.

Most of the interviews were conducted by staff members of the various presidential libraries, and nearly all are very dated. The first interview, for example, is of the first DCI, Sidney W. Souers, and dates from 1954. Others date from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The exception is the interview conducted of Samuel Halpern, who was interviewed in 1995 by the editor of this book. (Halpern retired from CIA in 1974; although the interview took place fairly recently, the subject matter discussed is dated. Nonetheless, this interview does provide some interesting—and even amusing—substantive material.)

The interviewers generally were friendly and did not ask provocative or probing questions. Even the interviewers from the so-called Rockefeller Commission who questioned Richard Bissell in 1975 seemed almost embarrassed to ask tough questions—and they were discussing CIA’s “alleged” involvement in plans to assassinate foreign leaders. Again, there is an exception. David Frost, who in 1978 conducted one of the three interviews in this book of former DCI Helms, did pose some difficult questions. Mr. Helms answered all the questions, but he apparently did his utmost to avoid provocative answers. In any event, Frost did not ask many follow-up questions.

The interviewers also seemed totally uninterested in what at least some intelligence professionals and other people believe are the meat and potatoes of intelligence work: the collection and analysis of information. A reader will look in vain in *Spymasters* for a discussion of how case officers seek to spot, assess, and recruit people to become spies, or how technical experts invent or adapt new technologies to aid in collecting information, or how analysts seek to make sense of disparate and often contradictory pieces of information and then to present to policymakers a coherent picture of what is happening around the world.

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Despite its title, *Spymasters* is not about “spies” or those who direct spies.¹ This is definitely not a book for readers looking for serious discussion of tradecraft or even of perhaps apocryphal stories of case officers meeting agents in the dead of night in some safehouse in a foreign land. Oleg Penkovsky’s name, for example, is mentioned once by an interviewer, and the question about Penkovsky is posed to a former Deputy Director for Intelligence, Robert Amory, Jr. In the same vein, some of the CIA’s greatest achievements—the development of the U-2 and the CORONA satellite reconnaissance program—are barely mentioned. And forget about finding any glimpses into the analytic process. (In two separate interviews, Mr. Helms tried to discuss what, at least, he regarded as a great analytic success: the prediction that Israel would militarily succeed in the war against the Arab states in 1967 within a week. The interviewers apparently were not interested.)

There are two other flaws in this book that, given its nature, are unavoidable but still disconcerting. One is that the subjects were all former DCIs or occupied other senior-level positions. A reader is naturally interested in learning what the senior people thought, but a strictly top-down approach actually prevents a reader from discovering the “real” story. Knowing what then-Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and other US and British generals thought about the D-Day landings in France is interesting, but Cornelius Ryan and Steven Ambrose have already “captured” D-Day by making available the thoughts and actions of the true heroes—the ordinary GIs.

The other unavoidable flaw of *Spymasters* is that it is a collection of interviews by different people of different subjects conducted at different times. Although the same topics are frequently mentioned, there is no continuity, no attempts to use material presented by earlier “witnesses,” no cross-examinations, no rebuttals. The reader notices, for example, Mr. Helms is clear in his opinion that former DCI William E. Colby made a serious blunder and caused “considerable damage” to CIA in “exposing CIA to the public.” Mr. Helms, in response to a question from David Frost: “I don’t believe that Colby was a KGB agent” (pages 285-286 of the paperback edition). Mr. Helms seems to be implying that it would not have mattered had Colby been a KGB agent. Now, the reader thinks, we have something really interesting. What does Colby say about this matter in his interview (the very next one)? Nothing—because the interviewer never brought up the subject—at least not in the interview published in this book.

Two subjects were utmost on the minds of the interviewers: the relationship of the DCI with “his” president (or presidents), and so-called covert action programs. The former DCIs who were interviewed answered all questions about their contacts and relations with “their” presidents very carefully. Thus, with one important exception, the former DCIs did not reveal much about their relations with the presidents or even implicitly criticize the presidents they served—even if they had been fired. The important exception was Mr. Helms, who was pressed rather hard and persistently by David Frost about this and CIA’s relationships with former President Nixon. Mr. Helms was at his most diplomatic when answering questions about Nixon, but he did opine that he thought that the Nixon administration had “abused” the CIA (page 271).

The topic of covert action occupies much of *Spymasters*. The reader is thus “treated” again to discussions about the Bay of Pigs disaster; Operation MONGOOSE, the Chilean

fiasco of the early 1970s; various programs in and about Vietnam (especially Operation PHOENIX); Operations CHAOS and MUDHEN (surveillance of US citizens such as Jack Anderson); and earlier operations such as MKULTRA (drugs research) and HTLINGUAL (mail intercepts). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the questions and answers on these topics would have been front-page news items. In 1999, they appear almost trivial because so much has already been revealed and published.

Spymasters contains little or no discussion of some not insignificant geographical portions of the world and historical events. Topics not mentioned at all or treated lightly include the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, China, the Middle East, South Asia, the Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the Berlin crises of 1958 to 1962, and the Indo-Pakistani war of the early 1970s.

Still, a reader can find some interesting tidbits in *Spymasters*. For example:

- John McCone denied in 1970 that the Cuban missile crisis was resolved in part by a “trade” of Soviet missiles in Cuba for US missiles in Turkey. In fact, as recently published material shows clearly, the Kennedy administration’s willingness to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey “clinched” the “deal” for Soviet leader Khrushchev. Mr. McCone presumably did not know of the deal, or he was still presenting the cover story of the Kennedy administration—as one would have expected him to do.
- Then-Vice President Johnson was disappointed when the Chinese did not bombard offshore islands to “celebrate” Johnson’s visit to Taiwan in 1961. According to Ray Cline, he had told Johnson that the Chinese had fired about 140,000 rounds at Quemoy and Chinmen when former President Eisenhower had visited Taiwan. Alas, the Chinese “ignored” Johnson’s presence.
- To “conceal” the CIA role in the Bay of Pigs invasion, then-DCI Dulles allegedly took a “cover trip” on the eve of the invasion. The idea presumably was that nobody would suspect CIA was involved if the DCI were not in Washington on the day of the invasion!
- Robert Amory was a decorated war hero who had served as a combat engineer during World War II and participated in 26 assault landings in the Pacific. He was not consulted by those planning the Bay of Pigs invasion (“need to know,” you know).
- Allen Dulles denied that he ever briefed then-Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy during the 1960 campaign about the plans to invade Cuba. Richard Bissell also denied that he briefed Kennedy. (Nixon later charged that Kennedy knew about the plans and irresponsibly used the information to gain an advantage during the campaign.)
- Richard Bissell was still angry in 1967 about the criticism of the handling of the Bay of Pigs invasion contained in the report prepared six years earlier by the then-Inspector General Lyman B. Kirkpatrick. In the same year, Kirkpatrick continued to defend the report. (Meetings of the Executive Committee in 1961 after the Bay of Pigs must have been something to behold.)

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- Richard Helms in 1978 still doubted the *bona fides* of Yuri Nosenko, who defected from the KGB in 1963.
- And, my favorite: Samuel Halpern revealed that in 1952 a minor “war” had been fought between competing elements (b)(1) [redacted] Those people who had originally served in the Office of Policy (b)(3)(c) nation (OPC)—the covert action “warriors”—were skirmishing with those people who originally served in the Office of Special Operations (OSO)—the intelligence collectors. Halpern said that the OPC people actually were shooting at the OSO officers and had abducted the OSO communicator to prevent OSO from sending messages to Washington!

Spymasters does have some positive aspects. In fact, its editor, a professor of history at Marquette University and (not incidentally) a former Scholar in Residence at both CIA and the National Security Agency, has provided an enormous service to those interested in the history of intelligence by compiling this collection of interviews. Professor Weber did diligent work at the various presidential libraries just in unearthing these interviews. Then, he (presumably) faced the onerous tasks of having them declassified and obtaining permission to have them printed in this collection. He also provides a brief and scintillating history of intelligence in America up to the creation of CIA in 1947. His thumbnail biographies of the CIA officials who are interviewed are also interesting and models of how to present such material.

Note

1. “Spymaster” is a neologism that may date from the late 1930s or World War II—depending on which dictionary one consults. It is not contained in the 2nd edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which was published in 1989. As I recall, “spymaster” was tossed around in the 1970s in popular magazines and on television programs mainly to describe characters from the novels of John le Carré. The term reappeared in the media in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when journalists used it to describe Markus Wolf, the chief of the foreign intelligence department of the East German Stasi. I assume that nearly all the subjects of this book would have been amused if somebody tried to tag them with the appellation “spymaster.” Allen Dulles, who seemed to revel in the nickname “The Great White Case Officer,” might have accepted and enjoyed the moniker.